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About the Strugatskys' "Roadside Picnic" (À propos du "Pick-nick au bord de la route" des frères Strougatsky)

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Source: *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Nov., 1983), pp. 317-332

Published by: SF-TH Inc

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239570>

Accessed: 20/06/2014 20:00

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Stanislaw Lem

About the Strugatskys' *Roadside Picnic*¹

Translated by Elsa Schieder and RMP

There are subjects which cannot be entirely exhausted. For theologians, such a subject is God. How can one definitively report on something which is, by definition, inexhaustible; how, when the description presumes a limit, can one describe a Being which, in principle, consists of infinite qualities? In this case, various strategies have been used: a multiplication of general concepts—which, however, generates no precise picture; comparisons—but they necessarily reduce the divine attributes to the level of all-too-concrete categories; or a spiralling approach to the subject whereby a definitive determination is replaced by an approximation—which for that reason is likewise inadequate.

The optimal strategy for theology has proved to be that of maintaining the mysteriousness of God. Yet to rigorously preserve that mystery, one would actually have to remain silent; and a silent theology ceases to be theology. The strategy therefore turned (in later—e.g., Christian—versions) into one operating on obvious contradictions. God the omniscient knew that from man as He had made him would come the Fall. Yet God created him free. If God was aware in advance that man would inevitably fall, then man was not free—which nevertheless is exactly what the theologian asserted he was. In this way dogmatically imposed contradictions create the very mystery before which reason must become silent.

An inexhaustible topic of fantastic literature is the reasonable, yet not human, being. How can a human author describe a being which is definitely gifted with reason, but which, with equally categorical certainty, is not human? The bare assertion of its reasonableness will not do, since the genre must work with facts. Here too, fantasists have resorted to various strategies. The one which proved the best in theology—namely, preserving the mystery—cannot be applied in exactly the same way: aliens, after all, are not deities but material beings like us. The author who describes them with the aid of various readily apparent contradictions is thus requiring the reader to believe in something absurd; whereas it is not, after all, in the writer's power to establish no-matter-what dogmas.

According to the simplest available strategy, then, intelligent beings differ from each other corporeally, and only from this area do their peculiarities arise. Mentally they are identical or similar to human beings, since there can be only one form of Reason. H.G. Wells gave reality to this view almost a hundred years ago in *The War of the Worlds*. His Martians have a horrifying appearance, which, however, will some day be man's. Their bodies have deteriorated to such an extent that their heads are almost all that remains; and, according to Wells's surmise, in the man of the future as well, the organism's viscera will atrophy and the cranium expand. The novel says nothing about Martian culture, as if that too had wasted away and consisted of nothing but technical mastery and the equation of might with the cosmic justification of the state. In Wells the future thus simplifies both physiology and culture. His Martians have no interest in anything human except human blood: like vampires, they nourish themselves on it. The Martians' technological achievements do, to be sure, arouse our admiration, but the poverty of their culture represents the fiction's

greatest weakness. Let us not speak of the loathing the aliens inspire—that can always be referred back to their physical environment. Still, is the behavior of the Martians not an unintentional caricature of an extreme rationalism?

The invasion of Wells's Martians is certainly justified by their situation as inhabitants of a dying planet that is turning into a desert, from which perspective the fruitful Earth hovers as territory [*Lebensraum*] to be conquered. What proves to be an exceptional case within the solar system was none the less thoughtlessly appropriated as the model for the whole SF genre. Indeed, the successors to Wells mechanically imitated the failings of the master. The SF which followed his sickened on the chronic monstrosity of stellar invaders, while leaving behind the rationale by which Wells accounts for it. Furthermore, later writers, wanting at all costs to surpass the founder of the genre in their rendering of aliens' hideousness, went well beyond the limits of plausibility. By equipping their aliens with ever greater power, they filled the entire universe with civilizations whose desire to expand is wholly irrational. The greater the power attributed to the aliens, the more irrational is their invasion of Earth. In this phase, SF became a fantasy of imposture and of paranoid delusions, because it claimed that the cosmic powers were sharpening their fangs the better to eat humanity, as if Earth and its treasures were of incalculable value not only for the inhabitants of a small desert planet like Mars, but for every imaginable civilization in the galaxy. Yet the preconception that a power with armies of starships at its disposal could be dead set on taking over our property is as naïve as the assumption that one of the superpowers of Earth would mobilize its armies in order to expropriate a grocery store. The price of the invasion must always be higher than the value of the loot.

Thus invasion-plots could not be motivated by interest in material gain. Instead, the aliens attack Earth because it pleases them to do so; they destroy because they want to destroy; they enslave humanity because it amuses them to exercise tyrannical mastery. In this way, SF exchanged Wellsian interplanetary Darwinism for a sadism which became a cosmic constant in intercivilizational contacts. SF's task of forming hypotheses was replaced by that of projection, in the sense the word has in depth-psychology: the authors projected their fears and self-generated delusions onto the universe. They thereby established a paranoid cosmos, in which everything having so much as a hint of life sets about the conquest of Earth—a cosmos which is a trap set to catch humankind, a cosmos whose evolution comes down to an embodiment of the principle of "Civilization as a wolf to Civilization" [cp. *homo lupus homini*].

This "den of thieves" cosmos was later transfigured many times over. Its general unfriendliness was mechanically transformed into friendliness. The aliens attack, but only to rob us of our free will and to preserve humankind by taking us into protective custody (this motif became especially popular during the Cold War years); or they don't attack immediately, but hesitate and thus enable humankind to unite: in view of the stellar threat, solidarity wins.

Further permutations of the invasion scenario resulted from these; yet none of the variations invented stands up to a thoughtful examination. They are incapable of answering certain elementary questions which Wells's novel—albeit in its own way—does pertinently address itself to. There is, for one, the question of what the motive is for the star-voyage—something which cannot be explained in terms of "they felt like it" or of a game of cops and robbers; for another, there is the question of the main orientation of cultures on a high level of material development; for yet another, there is the question of what form systems which have achieved a high level of astrotechnical accomplishment will assume; and so forth. But the most telling of such questions is this: why do actual human cultures show a tremendous richness approaching the truly diverse, while virtually all cosmic cultures in SF are marked by a depressing uniformity which borders on monotony?

To such questions SF could make no answer as long as it exchanged reflection on the fate of reason in the cosmos for sensational stereotypes of interplanetary adventure. In this way, SF's line of development—and this concerns the subject under discussion—became antithetical to that of science. At a time when scientists, beginning to discuss seriously the problem of how one might communicate with other civilizations in the universe, were formulating the hypotheses that Reason takes various forms and that not all possible manifestations of intellect need assume the human form, fantasy was already at the opposite pole from such thinking, driving the last remnants of realistic concepts out of its sphere through its undisguised borrowing from fairy tales. In its desire to furnish the aliens with ever greater power, it already ascribed protean abilities to them: such a being can, just by wishing it, transform itself into a tree, into part of a rocket, even into a human being. It can also take over a human body and control the human mind, thus in effect giving new life to a subject of old myths: possession by evil spirits. This fantasy destroyed intercultural barriers in short order, by ascribing some sort of telepathic omnipotence to the aliens; or on the other hand, it formed the cosmic relationships between the planets on primitive, simplistic models of earthly origin (those, for example, suggested by colonialism, by the exploits of the conquistadors, or by the rules governing the creation of imperialistic coalitions). In so doing, it disregarded all possible objections both of a sociological and of a physical nature—objections which are contingent on the tremendous spatio-temporal distances in the cosmos. That handicap it did away with once and for all, by conferring on the star-voyagers the ability to move at any desired speed. In short, while in Wells's modest effort the Martians—in accordance with the scientific data of his time—were at home in the real cosmos, SF now chose to locate its beings in a totally (i.e., astronomically, physically, sociologically, and—finally—psychologically) falsified cosmos. It practiced a ruthless exploitation, ransacking, in its search for inspiration, history textbooks and the Linnean system alike, in order to provide lizards, cuttlefish with grasping arms, crabs, insects, and so forth with intelligence. When even that had become threadbare and presently boring, the theme SF had run into the ground was in its teratological extremism taken over by the third-rate horror movie, which is perfectly bare of any thoughtful content.

American writers deny the validity of such a diagnosis of the facts, and they find allies in the book-buyers, who have become used to an easily digestible, sensationalistic literature which pretends to be science fantasy. Yet the fairy-tale nature of this "fantasy" is obvious. Nobody questions why the dragons in fairy tales are so mischievously bloodthirsty or why the witches in them prefer to devour children rather than chickens. These are simple axioms of the fairy tales, whose world is fundamentally partisan: evil appears in it so that it can be defeated by good. It is therefore clear that such evil must be powerful; otherwise, the final victory of good would seem too easily gained. The world of SF, on the contrary, must be impartial; it must not incubate evil merely for the sake of allowing the united interplanetary forces of virtue to overcome it. Nor should it be a partisan world with a minus sign, an anti-fairy-tale world in which the beautiful, amiable, and morally upright good is bred in order to give the greatest possible pleasure to an evil incarnate which proceeds to gobble it up with relish. (Such a world, incidentally, was imagined by the Marquis de Sade, whom one could hardly take for an author of science fantasy.) The SF world must be (to put it quite plainly) a real world: that is, one in which no one is privileged from the start, in which no fate is predetermined, whether in favor of good or of evil. Since men are not angels, there is no need to ascribe angelic traits to the aliens; since men, though they kill flies, do not exactly travel to the ends of the Earth to do so, similarly the aliens, even if they should regard us as flies, should not go out of their way to seek earthlings to swat.

An author who describes a life-form or type of intelligence different from the terrestrial variety is in an easier position than the one who depicts a cosmic invasion of Earth. The former can—as, for example, I did in *Solaris*—restrict himself or herself to portraying phenomena which differ as much as desired from what humans are familiar with. The latter, proceeding from the “interventionist” premise, assumes that the aliens have come to Earth and that, consequently, something or other must have dictated their literally astronomical undertaking. What could their motive have been? If it was not an impulse to fight or to steal, it must have been the urge either to learn or to play (they came in order to amuse themselves a bit with us...). There are, as we see, not many alternate possibilities. Thus the best strategy for dealing with this subject, too, is to preserve forever the aliens’ mysteriousness.

I would like to stress emphatically that this strategy is not founded, either entirely or primarily, on aesthetic criteria; that, in other words, the narrative must not preserve the aliens’ mysteriousness in order to continuously puzzle readers and hold them spellbound by the great unknown. The strategy does, of course, incline to conform to the fundamental directives of conflict theory. Thus, by way of example, future-strategists at military academies are required to impute to the enemy the most threatening intentions from the point of view of the strategists’ own side. In regard to cosmic aliens, such a dictate has a cognitive, rather than a military purport. Yet visitors fitted with absolutely inimical intentions do not represent the worst of all possible eventualities. In this case, the enemy’s attitude is at least clearly defined. The situation is worse when we absolutely cannot understand the peculiarities of their strange behavior, when we cannot explain their alien proceedings.

The strategy of preserving the mystery, if it is to be optimal, requires a precise concretizing. One cannot manage it in the way that theology does its subject, by working with contradictions. One cannot ascribe mutually exclusive purposes to the visitors—for example, they cannot want to conquer and at the same time not conquer. Still, one can rouse the appearance of such a contradiction—for example, the visitors may believe they are helping us, though we may feel that their actions are pernicious—and here one enters the realm of what is promising from a dramaturgical perspective: misunderstandings occasioned by the drastic disparity between civilizations. One can find attempts in this direction in SF, but they are not followed through: the intercivilizational misunderstandings always stay extraordinarily primitive puerilities which do not merit serious consideration. The author must invest a certain amount of intellectual effort in the construction of the *quid pro quo* which perplexes the meeting of two disparate cultures. The more factors from various areas that contribute to such a misunderstanding, the better. One ought to keep in mind that such an encounter is not a duel between two heroes, but a very confused interplay in which collective social organizations take part, organizations which differ radically from each other and to each of which the structure, meaning, and purpose of the other’s actions are foreign.

The overwhelming majority of SF texts can serve as examples of how not to tackle the theme of invasion. It is therefore all the more gratifying to come upon a work which, by and large, knows how to deal with the problem successfully. In *Roadside Picnic*, the Strugatsky brothers have employed the tactic of preserving the mystery to excellent effect; indeed, as they surpass the canon established by Wells, so, too, they transcend the SF tradition.

Roadside Picnic relies on two ideas. The first we have already designated as the strategy of preserving the mystery of the visitors. One does not know what they look like; one does not know what they want; one does not know why they came to this world, what their intentions were respecting humankind. Nor does one know exactly whether it’s absolutely certain that they have landed on Earth at all, and if they have,

whether they have already left again....

The second idea—and this is what makes *Roadside Picnic* an anomaly in SF—pertains to humanity's reaction to the landing. For something has landed—or, to put it more circumspectly, something has fallen from the sky. The inhabitants of Harmont have found that out tragically enough. In some areas of the city people go blind; in others, they fall victim to mysterious illnesses that are generally described as plague; and the depopulated area of the city turns into the Zone, whose properties, menacing as they are incomprehensible, abruptly separate it from the outside world. Yet the actual landing was no great natural catastrophe: it did not cause houses to topple down, nor did it make windows break for miles around. The book does not tell us much about what happened in the first phase of the creation of the Zone. Still, we learn enough to understand that we will not be able to fit the events and their consequences into any compartment of already-existing classificatory schemes. Those who escaped from Harmont in one piece and moved elsewhere become the center of incomprehensible events, of extreme deviations from the statistical norm (90% of the clients of a hairdresser who left Harmont die in the course of a year, though of "ordinary" causes—in a gangster attack, in traffic accidents—and wherever emigrants from the Zone increasingly congregate, the incidence of natural catastrophes rises proportionately, as Dr Pilman informs Noonan).

We thus have before us an incomprehensible infringement on causal connections. The narrative effect is striking. It has nothing to do with phantasmagoria in the form of a "visitation" because nothing supernatural occurs; and yet we are confronted with a mystery which is "much more terrifying than a stampede of ghosts" (as Dr Pilman says, 3:109).² Should someone seek for a hypothesis which would explain these effects, it might be possible to find one (let us assume that what has happened is caused by local disturbances of certain physical constants responsible for the normal probability curves in typical statistical equations: that is the easiest explanation, though only, of course, as it indicates the direction in which more research would have to be done, and not in the sense of being a solution to the problem). It turns out, then, that even when one has found a physical process whereby the mechanics of the unusual events can be explained rationally, one has not come a hair's breadth closer to the heart of the problem—viz., to the nature of the visitors. Thus the optimal strategy consists of presenting the individual actions of the visitors as a puzzle whose resolution either does not throw any light at all on the nature of the visitors or makes that nature seem even more unfathomable. This is not, as it might perhaps appear to be, something made up, like a fantasy novel's *ad hoc* inventions; for our knowledge of the world is acquired in just this way: perceiving some of its laws and peculiarities does not lessen the number of problems left to be solved; on the contrary, while making these discoveries, we begin to realize that there are further mysteries and dilemmas of whose existence we hitherto had no presentiment. Evidently, then, the scientific learning process can produce from its treasury even more "fantastic" wonders than the fairy-tale repertory does childish ones.

In *Roadside Picnic* things do not go as they do in *The War of the Worlds*. Wells's story of the Martian invasion involves a nightmarish, monumental breakdown of the human world, a dramatically heightened collapse of civilized order under visibly inflicted blows. One knows who the opponent is; one knows his methods; even his final goals are known (it would be difficult not to guess them!). All this has nothing in common with *Roadside Picnic*. To be sure, the invasion has presumably occurred; to be sure, it has left behind ineradicable traces in the form of "Zones"; and Earth is incapable of coming to grips with the consequences. Yet at the same time, the little world of humanity continues as before. Ominous miracles, descending on six spots on the planet like a cosmic rain, become the focal points of the various—legal as well as illegal—human activities that go on around all supposed sources of profit, no

matter how risky they are. The Strugatskys realize the strategy of preserving the mystery through an extremely subversive tactic—through well-nigh microscopic bearings on what is going on. We only learn through hearsay that experiments are being made on the “magnetic traps” discovered in the Zones, and that somewhere or other institutes for the study of extraterrestrial cultures are busy trying to comprehend the nature of the landing. About what governments think of the Zones, about how the Zones’ instauration has affected world politics, we find out nothing. By contrast, we witness every last detail of some episodes in the life of a “stalker,” of a new breed of smuggler who, because a demand exists for them, spends nights retrieving objects from the Zone. Through verbal snapshots, the story shows how the Zone has become surrounded, as a foreign body does when it has penetrated a living human organism, only in this case by a tissue of opposed interest groups: those connected with the official guardianship of the Zone (i.e., the UN), but also the police, the smugglers, the scientists, and—let’s not forget them—the members of the entertainment industry. This encirclement of the Zone by a ring of feverish activity is depicted with considerable sociological insight. Certainly the portrayal is one-sided, but the authors had good reason to focus on those figures whose activity, in a marked but also quite natural way, counters the typical SF scheme of things. The sense of fascination and depression which the “scenes from the life of a treasure hunter” (or “stalker”), the core of the story, inspire in the reader are the product of a deliberately restricted field of vision. The scientific and extra-scientific literature which the landing precipitated must undoubtedly have been a locus of bitter controversy. So, too, the landing must inevitably have brought about the formation of new attitudes and lines of thought; and it probably has not left either art or religion untouched; yet our perspective on the whole upheaval is perforce confined to the excerpts from the life of a poor joe who, in the drama of two civilizations colliding, strictly plays the part of a human ant.

It would nevertheless be a good idea for us to make ourselves aware of wider aspects of the event. Everyone will agree with Dr Pilman’s words that the invasion represents a decisive stroke in the history of mankind. Now in that history there have been quite a number of decisive moments, even though they were not exactly caused by a cosmic invasion; and each was marked by an intensification of the extremes of human behavior. Each of these decisive moments had its larger-than-lifesize figures and its pitiable victims. The greater the historic event, the more pronounced was the distance between the great and the insignificant, the sublimity and the wretchedness of human fates. Glorious battles at sea that once decided the destiny of empires possessed at a distance the beauty of a painting of a battle, and close-up a repulsive gruesomeness. One need only recall that chained to their benches, the rowers of galleys burned to death in Greek fire silently, because before the battle they were obliged to stuff their mouths with special pears to prevent their making any noise. (Their hellish shrieks, you see, would have had a negative effect on the soldiers’ morale!) Perceptions of such a battle would differ radically, depending on whether it were seen from the elevated perspective of the commanders [*Führer*] with their imperial aims, or from the viewpoint of the poor devils faced with a death-struggle—and yet their death-struggle was an integral part of the process of historical change. One could say that even such a beneficial discovery as that of X-rays, for example, had its horrific side, since the discoverers, unaware of the properties of these rays, had to have limbs amputated because of their effect. So, too, one of the by-products of the world’s industrialization is the leukemia which children are slowly dying from today. (We know this to be true, even though the causal connection cannot be palpably demonstrated.) The dreadful fate of the “stalkers” in *Roadside Picnic*, I should add, does not represent an extraordinary deviation brought about by the cosmic landing, but is precisely the rule of decisive moments in history—a rule that

distinctly points up the constant and inevitable connection between "picturesque" greatness and horrifying misery.

The Strugatsky brothers thus demonstrate that they are realists of the fantastic inasmuch as realism in fantasy betokens a respect for logical consequence, an honesty in deducing all conclusions entirely from the assumed premises. Even the uninhibited entertainment industry which encircles the Zone has its plausibility—indeed, I would say its necessity. The principles of human behavior operating in the narrative are thus the same as they ever are; the authors have merely directed their attention to the "dregs" in the cosmic encounters, so to speak—and the events thereby take the concrete form of a miracle introduced into a consumer society. This is not—what is sometimes meant by the latter term—a society which produces nothing but those goods to which consumers are immediately attracted. On the contrary, it is a society which considers everything to be within the scope of its endeavor: not only cars, refrigerators, and perfume but also sex, blood, and destruction it makes items for consumption, in good time seasoning each of them so that they become palatable. In the Middle Ages, the Zones would doubtless have caused movements of panic-stricken flight and migration; and they might afterwards have become centers of new religious beliefs, originating in response to their evidence for the Apocalypse, and breeding-grounds for prophecies and revelations. In our world, however, the Zones succumb to being domesticated; for what one can neither understand nor ignore, one can at least consume piecemeal. Accordingly, the Zones, rather than being the subject of eschatological thought, are the goal of bus tours. This admits of being explained with reference to a lust for phenomena once regarded solely as abhorrent but these days enforcing the popularity of an aesthetic which in place of beauty has set the repulsive. That is the spirit of the times to which in the Strugatskys' story anything evincing its complete independence from man—as the mysteriousness of the visitors nearly does—succumbs. All in all, *Roadside Picnic* implies that the landing passes over 99% of humankind without a trace; and precisely in this regard, the Strugatskys set themselves against the entire SF tradition.

Theirs is no banal opposition. Dr Pilman, given to expressing himself in the terminology of physics, calls mankind a "stationary system" (3:100); translated into the language of the historian, this means that contact with the aliens, insofar as it does not equate with a global catastrophe, cannot change the course of human history with one fell swoop, since mankind is not capable of suddenly leaping out of its history and—impelled by a cosmic intervention—stepping into a completely different history. This supposition—in my view a correct one—is something which SF has neglected in its avidity for the sensational. In *Roadside Picnic*, by contrast, the landing is not intended as something strange for the sake of its strangeness; instead, it establishes the starting conditions for a thought-experiment in the domain of the "experimental philosophy of history"—and that is exactly what determines the value of this book.

There is only one point about which I would fain take issue with the book—a point having to do not with human matters (these are presented unobjectionably), but with the actual nature of the visitors. I might premise my discussion on four propositions. The first is that in the book we are given data, but not necessarily opinions about these data, even when the characters harboring such opinions are holders of the Nobel Prize. This means that we consider ourselves to have as much of a warrant to postulate theories about the visitors as the fictional personages have. Second, on all imaginable levels of knowledge there is given no 100% error-free course of action. Such infallibility would of course require that one possessed complete information about what can occur in the course of making one's plans a reality; but the universe is a place in which the attaining of complete information about anything whatever is never possible. According to the third of my propositions,

the principle of freedom from contradictions in thinking obtains for us as for other beings in the cosmos. This means that of two things, one must prove to be the case: if the "visitors" were aware of the presence of humans on Earth, then they can not at the same time have been unaware of it; if they harbored any design at all *vis-à-vis* human beings, then they could not at the same time have harbored no design; and so on. Finally, in explaining unknown phenomena, the simplest hypotheses, as stipulated by the principle of Ockham's Razor, are always to be preferred. If, for example, we live next door to a famous magician and hear dead silence from his side of the dividing wall for a long while, we can explain that in many ways: the neighbor may have dissolved into thin air, or he may have transformed himself into a paper clip, or he may have gone up to heaven through his window. We would tend to take refuge, however, in the quite commonplace explanation: that he simply left the house quietly and unperceived. Only when that hypothesis proves wrong are we compelled to look for another, and less banal, one.

These are the standpoints from which we negotiate the encounter with the visitors.³ In regard to the landing, a distinction must be made between what the aliens left in the Zones and the way in which they did this. In the opinion of Dr Pilman, who expresses the outlook of most specialists, the gap between the civilizations turned out to be too great for human beings alone to be able to surmount it; the other side, however, failed to give its assistance. What the visitors have left behind human beings can deal with only as fragments of a strange technology whose functioning is incomprehensible. As for the manner in which the visitors bequeath the so-called objects to men, Dr Pilman's thesis—which is central to the story since the title on the cover already anticipates it—represents this to us in the form of a parable. Mankind finds itself in the situation of animals which, having crept from their hiding places to a roadside or clearing where incomprehensible creatures have stayed, rummage around among the remains of the camp site. This analogy expresses Pilman's honest conviction, even though in his conversation with Noonan he enumerates other going hypotheses about the landing. Dr Pilman is not just anyone; he has finally received the Nobel Prize for his discovery of the "Pilman Radiant." At the same time, he is a misanthrope—as outstanding scholars frequently are. Such men strongly sense the ambiguity of their societal role. For civilized society, which is brought forth from the fruits of their thinking, they are indispensable; yet it treats them quite inconsiderately. The political powers expropriate their discoveries, but public opinion none the less makes the researchers themselves answerable for the consequences of that expropriation. An awareness of this situation does not dispose one towards kindness. Instead it arouses either rebellion or cynicism; but whoever finds rebellion useless and cynicism repugnant tries to behave like a stoic. Such a person gets used to choosing the lesser evil; and when one tries to corner him with questions, he answers evasively or with sarcasm. This is precisely Dr Pilman's attitude, a primarily defensive stance which he has assumed in the interview with which the story begins.

In his conversation with Noonan, Pilman is certainly less spitefully laconic than he is with journalists. Because he is talking confidentially to someone he knows—besides which he is somewhat inebriated—he inclines towards straightforwardness. That Pilman, as he is psychologically delineated by his judgments on the landing, is by the same token not unbiased is another matter. The simile of leftovers from a picnic which he has availed himself of may accurately reflect the situation of human beings *vis-à-vis* the things found in the Zone; but in respect to the visitors it is all too lenient. The so-called leftovers, objects which are dangerous to all living beings, were not after all thrown away in some deserted spot. They were tossed into the middle of a city. It is a fact that urban areas do not amount to even one per cent of Earth's surface. That is why, though the cosmos has been "throwing" meteors at the Earth

for millenia, so far no meteor has fallen on a city. It would seem, then, that the landing in Harmont was not the work of chance. One could suppose that the visitors landed in the city because they wanted to. They held their picnic not on a roadside or in a deserted clearing, but right on top of our heads. The event thereby appears in another light. There is, after all, a difference between sitting down for a picnic near an anthill, and pouring gasoline from the car over the anthill and setting it on fire. The roadside picnic of Pilman's friendly analogy presupposes total indifference to the fate of the human ants. The picture of deliberate destruction, on the other hand, presupposes a high level of ill will, since one would really have to take the trouble of coming from far off in order to destroy the anthill. Indifference and malevolence are not the same thing; and in this regard it is unfortunate that the story is silent as to whether even one of the other landings took place in a human settlement.

As we see, this bears on a paramount question, one which is critical for clarifying the visitors' relationship to man, and hence a question which all the characters in the fiction must similarly be aware of. One landing in a city could be the work of extraordinary chance, but two such landings certainly could not. We are thus inevitably led to the following reflection: if it were the case that the visitors had also landed in another city apart from Harmont, a roadside picnic would manifestly be a false image. But since Pilman has chosen this analogy, we assume that we are dealing with an isolated fact. That is very important for our further considerations.

Dr Pilman details various hypotheses concerning the nature of the landing. He omits only one which commands our attention. This we will introduce after we have gathered (as follows) the conclusive evidence in its favor....

(1) First of all, two characteristics—unrelated to one another—of almost all the objects found in the Zone attract our notice. One is that these objects have retained a measure of functionality: they are not passive, lifeless, deactivated waste or rubbish. The second is that they are commensurable in size (and weight) with the human body. This can be inferred from the fact that one man can lug objects well-nigh intact from the Zone on his back without having to take them apart first. None of the larger units needs to be dismantled or broken up—which is why the equipment of the treasure hunters includes no tools. These objects lie loosely strewn about. Now suppose we were to dump a considerable amount of the industrial debris of our civilization (wrecked cars, industrial equipment, scrap metal, old bridges, used machines) here and there on the Samoan islands: the natives would in that case come upon far more objects incommensurable with their bulk than corresponding to it. If, on the contrary, a number of strange objects found scattered in a given place were of an order of magnitude according with that of the human body, it would be an *a priori* probable hypothesis that these things had been destined for their discoverers. Naturally one can still claim that pure chance is answerable for the fact that the objects found in the Zone are proportionate to human bulk. But it appears otherwise when many "pure coincidences" begin to come together in a meaningful pattern.

(2) Next, it is notable among the Zone's numerous characteristics that its boundaries are rigidly and sharply fixed. Neither flying objects such as the "hairy stuff" (1:19) nor other Zone phenomena (the "jelly" [2:56], thermal shocks, etc.) ever cross over the demarcation line between the Zone and its environs. One could once more claim that this "self-containment" of the Zone, which sets its own strict limits, is the result of a further "pure coincidence." However, it is *a priori* a more probable hypothesis that this is not the case, but that the Zone "holds itself in check" because it contains something which, according to the visitors' plan and intent, merits such enclosure.

(3) Then again, entire objects lie scattered chaotically in the Zone. It is probably this which has put Dr Pilman in mind of a roadside picnic, where garbage is left behind. It thus really does appear as if these things were carelessly thrown away. But

one can also defend the view that nobody threw them away, that they scattered themselves chaotically when the containers they were brought in burst.

(4) Furthermore, the objects in the Zone frequently have the character of extremely dangerous pitfalls or booby-traps. Compared to dealing with them, defusing bombs or mines is sheer child's play. Again one cannot exclude the possibility that they were carelessly discarded by visitors indifferent to human welfare, or even the other possibility that the visitors treated people in the way that an assassin treats children when he passes out poisoned candies in a kindergarten. But another explanation is also permissible: that the objects do not function in the way they should because they were damaged during the landing.

(5) Finally, it is worth remarking that among the forces at work in the Zone are those which produce an effect of "resurrection from the grave." Under their influence, human corpses rise up and begin to move about. This is treated as a resurrection not of the dead, who are thereby returned to their normal state of living, but—to use the term from the story—of "moulages—...dummies" (3:109), whose newly-formed tissue is not identical with normal living tissue. To quote Pilman: "if you cut off some part...[from these living corpses], the part will live on. Separately. Without any physiological solutions to nourish it" (3:109). (Dr Pilman claims that such a quasi-resurrection would violate the second law of thermodynamics; this is not a necessarily valid conclusion, but we do not want to quarrel with the learned man at this point, because doing so would take us too far off our track.) The "pseudo-resurrection" of the "zombies," or "moulages"—their reconstruction from a skeletal basis—is an effect which is very important for understanding the nature of the landing. Their "resurrection" seems to be more probable as a consequence of purposive rather than undirected activities; and by the same token, it would certainly appear easier to resurrect real, concrete life-forms (i.e., terrestrial ones, consisting of albumen) than "omnipossible" (and hypothetical) forms of life in the cosmos. We do not know if that is correct, just as we do not know if the effect not be directed exclusively at the visitors themselves (it might be a "remedy in their first-aid kit"). But whatever is the case, the resurrection-effect suggests that the visitors knew a lot about the physiology of terrestrial life forms.

All of this constitutes the evidence for our hypothesis. We maintain that there has been no landing after all. Our hypothesis, indeed, runs otherwise.... A spaceship filled with containers that held samples of the products of a highly developed civilization came into the vicinity of the Earth. It was not a manned ship, but an automatically piloted space-probe. That is the simplest explanation of why no one manages to observe a single visitor. Every other hypothesis has to assume either that the visitors are invisible to humans or that they deliberately hide from them. In the approach to Earth, the vessel sustained damage and broke into six parts, which one after another plunged from their orbit to Earth.

This seems to contradict what is said about the radiants discovered by and named after Dr Pilman; they ostensibly confirm that Someone fired at Earth six times from Alpha Centauri in the Cygnus constellation. Nevertheless, between our interpretation and the radiants there stands no contradiction. In astronomy the term *radiant* refers to a likely place in the heavens from which a meteor swarm is approaching. The determination of a radiant in astronomy is not synonymous with taking a fix on the place from which the meteors actually originate. They may approach on an elliptical or parabolic curve; the radiant is a tangent which a terrestrial observer plots on such a curve, and it extends backwards (in the opposite direction from the meteors' fall) until it reaches the place in the heavens where a specific cluster of stars is located. Thus when one names meteors according to their radiants, this by no means signifies that the meteors are in fact emanating from that star cluster after which astronomers have named them. Consequently, the Pilman

Radiant offers us no clue at all as to whether what descended in the Zones was actually sent from the principal star of the Cygnus constellation. As to where the six flying objects or probes came from, the Pilman Radiant can tell us nothing, albeit the story directly encourages the impression that it can. That is a false impression, occasioned by Dr Pilman's insufficiently precise manner of expressing himself in responding to journalists' queries at the outset of the story. That what has arrived here actually flew directly from Alpha Centauri to Earth is out of the question. Traversing such a distance on a perfect flight-path borders on an astronomical impossibility, since on the way innumerable interferences (above all, those of gravitational forces) must influence the trajectory. In addition, it is mathematically demonstrable that the curve which six shots would produce on the surface of a sphere (while the sphere is rotating, as the Earth does) cannot be distinguished from the curve resulting from the projection of a segment in the orbital trajectory onto the surface of the sphere. Pilman's radiant does not altogether exclude the hypothesis of a disintegrated spaceship crashing in six separate sections, one after the other. Once one knows a meteor's radiant and its final velocity, one can compute the orbital path from which it actually approached, because a meteor, being an inanimate object subject to the laws of celestial mechanics, cannot alter its course at will. From a spaceship's radiant, on the other hand, one can make out nothing about its place of origin, its course, its travel speed, etc., because a spaceship is a navigable, mechanized body and can execute maneuvers, make course corrections, change its speed, and so forth. In short, from the so-called Pilman Radiant nothing follows in favor of any one of the hypotheses about the landing.

Of course we cannot know for sure that the spaceship was indeed the victim of a catastrophe. None the less, our hypothesis accounts for everything that happened, and does so in the most economical manner. Why should one not properly assume that the landing has miscarried? To suppose that the unusual nature of the objects found in the Zone demonstrates the high level of the visitors' ingenuity and thus precludes a calamity's befalling their ship were a logically false inference. The visitors' perfection, in consequence of which no harm could come to their ship, is neither a fact nor a rationally defensible hypothesis, but merely an article of faith. Perfection to the point of infallibility is, in our judgment, reserved solely for those entities with which theology concerns itself—which is to say, there is no infallible applied science. We are not asserting that an accident definitely occurred, merely that a breakdown would, in one fell swoop, account for everything that happened by reference to a common single cause.

Besides, the facts that we mentioned in point (1) above about the characteristics of the objects found in the Zone make plausible the conjecture that someone sent containers of technological specimens in Earth's direction. Our point (2) (concerning the Zone's "self-containment") further increases the likelihood of (1), that the senders, unable to be absolutely certain that no catastrophe would befall their spaceship during its landing, must at least have provided for a minimizing of the consequences, and have done so precisely by installing on board a safety device which would not allow the effects of the catastrophe to spread, but would almost hermetically confine them to one place. This must naturally have been a device meant to survive the aftermath of the catastrophe. Somehow it has survived. The fact mentioned above under my third point heightens the probability that an accident has occurred, because nothing is more natural than that the containers' contents should be chaotically scattered by the force of the impact with Earth. Even the fact cited as my fourth point (i.e., the perils the objects present) becomes understandable as a consequence of the same cause. Not only did the containers burst upon impact, but most of their contents was damaged in various ways. The same thing would happen if someone were to drop containers with food stuffs, medicines, insecticides,

etc. down to the Samoan islands in what turn out to be defective parachutes. These crash to earth and the containers rupture—in consequence of which, the chocolates are full of hexachlorides, the gingerbread full of emetics, and so on. It is possible for the Samoans to conclude that someone has made a very malicious attempt on their lives; yet in the Samoans' place scientists ought not to jump to the same conclusion. What we are getting at is that the intention of the "Others" does not manifest itself in the pernicious character of the cosmic offerings: it is not the case that they took pleasure in pelting us with deadly debris, but rather that an unfortunate accident—the defect in their spaceship—transformed their well-intended consignment into scrap-metal. (We do not want to go into further specifics of our hypothesis here; but in general terms, they would run as follows: since the ship left no trace behind, it must certainly not have landed but simply accomplished the dropping off of the containers. The containers, moreover, need not necessarily have taken the form of material vessels; the objects may have been "packaged," held together, by a type of force field, whose failure at a crucial moment caused the contents of the "packages" to rain down on Earth.)

The Strugatskys might tell us that the hypothesis of "samples" is likewise taken into account in their book. After all, in his conversation with Noonan, Dr Pilman makes mention of the possibility that "[a] highly rational culture threw containers with artifacts of its civilization onto Earth. They expect us to study the artifacts, make a giant technological leap, and send a signal in response to show we are ready for contact" (3:103). However, this version—which, by the way, does not admit the possibility that the consignments have arrived in a disastrously damaged condition—the story through an ironic undertone utterly discredits. Indeed, how could objects which are more dangerous than explosives and which are dispatched to unknown addressees as gifts be supposed to invite the recipients to make contact? That would be like sending someone an invitation to a ball, but enclosing the invitation in a letter-bomb. In the story's presentation of it, this hypothesis is therefore the one which is most self-compromised in view of the Zone's macabre characteristics.

The hypothesis of an accident, on the other hand, not only explains events quite naturally, but also rehabilitates at once the "others" as Senders and the human beings as Recipients of a "Danaic gift" from the stars. The senders, far from being guilty of wrongdoing, have even—as was their duty—foreseen the worst possibility and provided the shipment with a safety device, thanks to which all of the Zone's effects are confined to a particular location. Accordingly, the Zone's peculiarity is most simply explained by the foresight of the senders, who, unable to eliminate the possibility of an accident, therefore took care that its consequences would be kept within bounds. The hypothesis of an accident likewise exonerates humankind, and especially the learned, whose perplexity about the gift becomes understandable, given the additional difficulties they have to overcome because they do not know which of the properties of the objects in the Zone were intended by the designers and which are the result of the damage incurred during the catastrophe.

It does not take long to explain why the authors silently passed our version of the landing by. It could not please them because it detracts from the work's menacing and hence mysterious atmosphere. Still, their error lies in just this silence about the possibility of an accident. We understand quite well why they chose this course. In the meeting of the civilizations, both sides were *meant* to be discredited. Men agree on using the gift only in base and self-destructive ways because that is human nature; and the Senders prove their murderous indifference to humanity because beings of high intelligence do not give a damn about their intellectual inferiors. So extreme a version of the invasion theme would have deserved literary representation, all the more since it surpasses everything which SF has so far accomplished in this direction. But in that case the narrative would have had to rule out our hypothesis about the

damaged gift; it would have had to bring it to grief from the outset—that is, it ought to have discredited it. Silence about it, on the other hand, though intended to consign our version to oblivion, constituted a mistaken authorial tactic.

From what has been said, conclusions of a more general nature arise with regard to the optimal strategy for dealing with the invasion theme.⁴ In order to carry out the strategy of preserving the mystery, two requirements have to be rigorously fulfilled. First of all, the author must not arouse the suspicion that certain facts are being hidden from the reader, facts beknown to the fictive heroes (all of *Roadside Picnic*'s protagonists must know, for example, whether another Zone, aside from the one in Harmont, also lies within a city's limits). The reader must remain convinced that the information the author imparts is, within the limits of possibility, complete. The mystery then will be kept hidden by the very unfolding and presentation of the depicted events, which create, as it were, an impenetrable mask behind which no one can see. Otherwise this effect can be achieved only through a very precise balancing of the facts. They may neither point in one direction too unequivocally, nor overwhelm us by being all too chaotically diffuse. What they attest to must remain undecided, on the divide, as it were, between diverging alternatives, without inclining definitively towards any one side.

Now our excellent authors have defeated their own purposes by maligning the visitors at the end of their story. That the Golden Ball is supposed to fulfill wishes is, of course, a naïve belief, one of those popular legends which rose up in the wake of the visit. It was clear to the authors that they could not make an infernal machine out of this Ball, since that would have been an exaggeration which would have changed the meaning of their book: it would have transformed the Zone from something ambiguous, albeit dismal, into an unequivocal trap for humankind. Therefore they made the Golden Ball into an almost neutral object and let death stand not in it, but right beside it, as a “transparent emptiness that was lurking in the shadow of the excavator's bucket” (4:143), a nothingness that throttles Arthur before Redrick's eyes. Comparing the first expedition into the Zone that Redrick undertakes (together with Panov) with the last (which, in the company of Arthur, leads to the Golden Ball), one recognizes that the latter adventure has the structure of a “black fairy tale.” The fairy-tale quality is not difficult to spot: like a valiant knight-errant seeking the elixir of life or a magic ring, the heroes must overcome dreadful and dangerous obstacles while striving toward a highly valued treasure. Furthermore, Redrick knows that the approach to the Golden Ball is barred by a mysterious “grinder” (4:130) which one must “satiate” by bringing it a human sacrifice. That is why he lets Arthur be the first to approach the sphere—and in fact Arthur dies before his eyes, and his death momentarily breaks the evil spell, so that Redrick in his turn can then reach the Golden Ball. At that point, the authors break off the tale and subscribe the word *finis*. This, however, is a way out which merely attenuates the shape of things without altering it.

The authors claim—and I have discussed this point with them—that the convergence in the Golden Ball of fairy-tale motif and the Horrific originates solely in the human mind and is a product of chance and human phantasy. Yet as we have previously stated, one must not arrange all too many “coincidences” which all point in one and the same direction; for it then becomes incredible that they came about by chance. Besides, the last expedition into the Zone does not have the generic attributes of SF. The realistic frame for the events transforms itself into that of a fairy tale,⁵ because the “coincidences” following the one upon the next amount, as we have already observed, to the stereotypic quest for the accursed treasure, though they ought not be identical with any stereotype. The mystery is not consistently preserved to the very end; behind it, the truth keeps shimmering through, since we no doubt have an idea about who the visitors are: they are, once more, monsters, albeit

invisible monsters.

The authors attempt to distract the reader from this thought, which flatly forces itself upon us. They stress, for example, that the Golden Ball seen from a distance gives the impression that an unknown giant has accidentally lost it. That, however, is not the correct tactic. It is not the authors' commentary which should divert us from the structurally obtrusive solution, but the events themselves in their objective unfolding. Then, too, the strong impact the epilogue makes spoils the outstanding impression the book makes overall.

Max Frisch transposed the Oedipus myth into our contemporary reality in his novel *Homo Faber*, wherein the father as unknowingly enters into an incestuous relationship with his daughter as Oedipus did with his mother. Frisch managed the events of the novel in such a way that each possesses a normal, realistic verisimilitude, while together they structurally correspond to the Oedipus myth. The difference between *Homo Faber*'s affinity for myth and *Roadside Picnic*'s for the fairy tale lies herein: that Frisch had in mind the achieved similarity while the Strugatskys by no means desired it. That is the very reason why I say that they "have defeated their own purposes," because only discretion in the arrangement of events could have guarded the end of the story against an unwanted connection with the main plot and hence with the ethos of a fairy tale.

A theologian would have had no difficulty preserving the mystery in *Roadside Picnic*, for he can employ contradictions. But since science does not have such a recourse, it is not an exaggeration for me to say that the difficulties of a fantasy writer who sides with science are generally greater than those of a theologian who acknowledges the perfection of God....

NOTES

1. The foregoing essay, subscribed "July 1975" in the Polish original, has been translated from the text that appeared as the Afterword to Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's *Picknick am Wegesrand* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 189-215. The essay first came out as an appendix to the Polish translation of the Strugatskys' *Piknic na obočinie: Piknik na skraju drogi* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1977), pp. 265-88. For this last bit of information, and for his generous assistance in checking our rendering of Lem, we are indebted to Dr Franz Rottensteiner, who, however, is not to be held accountable for our errors. We are equally grateful to Elizabeth Kwasniewski for her help and patience in correcting the English translation against the original Polish. [RMP]

2. Parenthetical references (which the translators have supplied) are to *Roadside Picnic*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (NY: Macmillan, 1977). This volume also includes *Tale of the Troika*. [RMP]

3. Our entire explanation, which provides a new interpretation of the riddle presented by the landing in *Roadside Picnic*, may seem to be an aberration brought on by excessive pedantry, all the more so since, after all, we are not analyzing a real event, but a literary fiction. But truly scientific fantasy is distinguished by just this: that one can subject the events described in it and their rational depiction to the same proof of coherence as phenomena that occur in the extraliterary world. Such a work may start with a fictive, even an extremely fictive, premise. Yet this authorizes only an initial poetic license, which loses its validity within the story itself. This means that the story-teller may not, within the story, continue to help himself along by the *ad hoc* invention of whatever things or phenomena strike his fancy. Fairy tales may operate with such *ad hoc* inventions; for they are not at all required to explain logically or empirically the miraculous occurrences they depict. An SF story which makes this fairy-tale license its own leaves the realm of the real world and puts itself in the position of the fairy tale, in which everything which is thought of or said for that very reason instantly becomes possible and must be unquestioningly accepted as true coin by the reader. In short, though the facts in an SF story may be fictive,

the way in which science in the fiction interprets these facts may not. Scientific theories change; but what does not change is the method of discovery which characterizes science, and it is precisely this methodology which dictates a certain type of hypothesis-formation in SF. Accordingly, our polemic, as an example of how criticism of SF should typically proceed, can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to every work which fulfills the main criteria of this genre.

4. We are presenting the hypothesis of the calamity in its simplest, which does not mean its most probable, version. For example, an unmanned spaceship with containers might have been sent forth without any fixed addressee in mind; it might have been outfitted with sensors which would recognize the planet to be "gifted" by virtue of predetermined parameters (such as its average temperature; its atmospheric composition, particularly the presence of free oxygen and water; an orbit favorable to ecological development; etc.). Such an automatically-piloted vehicle could have approached various stars on a scouting mission. However, because it is physically impossible to manufacture technological products to survive undamaged over a journey of indeterminate length (which may take millions of earth-years), such a vehicle must have been provided with a device which would automatically destroy the contents when their "shelf-life" had ended. Such a vehicle could have entered our solar system as the "shelf-life" of the articles was nearing the expiry date. After all, it could also have been that the self-destruction did not occur only because the ship's surveillance system discovered Earth and dispersed the containers with their "partially spoiled" contents. The degree of damage to individual surveillance, steering, and control systems is uncertain; only the statistical probability of damage can be determined—i.e., the one thing absolutely certain is that the probability of defects occurring in the programs and their execution system increases with the passage of time. I should emphasize this point: the more complicated a device, the more inevitable are breakdowns over the course of time; this is a universal law which is independent of where in the cosmos the technology was produced or how. Therefore, the enterprise of learning about the aliens—what the Strugatskys call *xenology*—must take the statistical probability aspect of intercivilizational contact into account as something crucial for interpreting such visits.

5. The degree to which the authors followed the fairy tale's structural pattern in their epilogue can, for example, be seen in the passage in which "black twisted stalactites that looked like fat candles" (4:141) are mentioned. These are all that is left of the people the Golden Ball has killed—that is, all that is left of Redrick's and Arthur's predecessors in the quest for the accursed treasure. In fairy tales such remains—the bones of daredevils who ran out of luck—usually lie at the entrance of the dragon's cave, at the foot of the glass mountain, etc.

RÉSUMÉ

Stanislav Lem. À propos du Pick-nick au bord de la route des frères Strougatsky.—*La stratégie que les théologiens appliquent ordinairement à leur Principal Sujet n'est pas de celles qui s'offrent à l'écrivain de SF. Le mystère de l'extraterrestre, à la différence du mystère de Dieu, ne peut être préservé par le recours à des contradictions dogmatiquement imposées: ce serait trahir la nature de la science-fiction.... La présentation de l'extraterrestre n'est pas sans problème toutefois. Wells, en faisant de ses Martiens des êtres physiquement hideux, les laisse intellectuellement et socialement indéterminés; leurs motifs pour envahir notre planète demeure de trop reconnaissables caricatures de motivations humaines et compromet leur étrangeté. La légion d'imitateurs qui ont repris Wells et cherché à surpasser le "monstrueux" des Martiens de Guerre des mondes ont réglé les problèmes en privant les Envahisseurs cosmiques de toute motivation intelligible et n'ont produit qu'une sorte de conte de fée inversé au lieu d'une authentique SF.*

Les frères Strougatsky ont trouvé une excellente manière de s'en tirer qui consiste à ne pas dépeindre les extraterrestres du tout. Pas le moindre aperçu sur les Visiteurs, rien

que les résultats concrets de leur passage. Ici, énormément de détails, qui, vus de façon microscopique si l'on peut dire, demeurent tout juste cela: des détails. En ce qui concerne la source et la signification des terribles objets construits à Harmont Zone, on n'en finit pas de théoriser, mais le Dr Pilman favorise une explication ultime: il s'agit des détritus d'un pick-nick extraterrestre au bord de la route. Les "pillards" qui se livrent à des incursions dans la Zone en vue d'en tirer profit semblent inventés pour discréder les deux parties dans cette rencontre de deux civilisations. Les humains se conduisent de façon basse et auto-destructive; les Visiteurs ne montrent à l'humanité qu'une indifférence meurtrière. Le récit n'exclut pas la possibilité, qui détruirait la signification suggérée ici: celle que les objets étaient contenus dans un engin d'exploration qui se serait brisé près de notre planète et dont les éléments seraient arrivés sur terre en mauvais état. Cette hypothèse ne correspond pas à l'analogie suggérée par le titre cependant.

À cette faiblesse, la façon de conclure des frères S. en ajoute une autre. Avec la quête de la Balle d'Or menée par Arthur et Redrick, le récit s'achève en conte de fée, effet discordant et fâcheux par rapport au reste du livre. De telles faiblesses montrent les difficultés qu'il y a à vouloir préserver le mystère de la SF à travers le déroulement même de l'intrigue et la présentation des événements. (RMP)

Abstract.— *The strategy theologians apply to their principal subject is not properly available to the writer of SF. The mystery of the Alien, unlike that of God, cannot be preserved by resorting to dogmatically imposed contradictions without betraying the true nature of science fiction. Yet presenting the Alien has its problems. H. G. Wells's approach in making his Martians physically hideous left them mentally and socially unreconstructed; their motives for invading Earth remain recognizable caricatures of human thinking and hence compromise their Otherness. However, the legion of imitators who have debased the example of The War of the Worlds in trying to outdo it in the realm of monstrosity have disposed of that problem by neglecting to furnish their Cosmic Invaders with any motive whatever only to supply themselves with another, by substituting a malign, inverted fairy-tale universe for the real world that SF should model itself after.*

The best way out of such difficulties lies with the method the Strugatskys adopt in Roadside Picnic: of not-depicting the Alien. They never allow us a sight of the Visitors, only the concrete results of their "landing." About the latter the authors offer us plenty of details, which viewed microscopically, as it were, remain exactly that: details. Concerning the source and significance of the deadly objects that have constituted themselves as Harmont's Zone there is no end of theorizing; but the explanation finally favored, Dr Pilman's, is the one the title anticipates: that we are dealing with the debris from an Alien roadside picnic.

Within the context of such a hypothesis, the Strugatskys' focus on the lives of the "stalkers," who make perilous forays into the Zone in pursuit of profit, seems designed to discredit both sides in the meeting of two civilizations. The human beings behave solely in base and self-destructive ways, while the Visitors prove their murderous indifference to humanity. Unfortunately, however, the fiction does not exclude a possibility that undermines this intended meaning: that the objects were contained in a space-probe vehicle which broke apart upon nearing our planet; that consequently raining down on Earth, they arrived in damaged condition. This accident would account in the most economical way for all the "fictifacts," but it does not comport with the authors' title analogy.

If their oversight in failing to rule out the hypothesis of a "damaged gift" is one defect of Roadside Picnic, the Strugatskys' manner of concluding their narrative is another. With Arthur and Redrick's quest for the Golden Ball, the fiction becomes fairy-tale-like—an unintended effect at odds with the book's overall impression. That so highly commendable an attempt to treat the theme of Cosmic Invasion should suffer from these weaknesses underscores the difficulties to be encountered in trying to carry out the optimal strategy of preserving the SF mystery through the very unfolding and presentation of the fictional events. (RMP)